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A Lesson in Hope. By: Graf, Christine. Faces (07491387), May2003, Vol. 19 Issue 9, p18, 4p, 4 color; Abstract: Presents information on the Hope Flowers School in a Palestinian village near Bethlehem. Reading Level (Lexile): 980; (AN 9742727)

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A Lesson in Hope

A symbol of hope can be found in the desert near Bethlehem. Located in the Palestinian village of Al-Khader, it is called the Hope Flowers School.

Hussein Issa founded the school in 1984. He grew up in a refugee camp. Instead of making him angry and bitter, the experience inspired him to help future generations of Palestinian children.

Hussein knew firsthand that the economic hardship and violence faced by the children each day took a tremendous toll on them. He wanted to provide them with a safe place where they could receive an education and learn that it was possible to live in peace with their Israeli neighbors.

Hussein, who died in March 2000, was a Palestinian peace activist. Through his school, his hope was "to infuse our children with the importance, beauty, and necessity of peace." His peaceful ideas were not popular with all Palestinians, and he and his family were repeatedly threatened and harassed for their involvement with the school.

Hope Flowers started in a rented room with 22 kindergarten students who didn't even have chairs to sit on. It has grown into a five-story building with hundreds of students and a fully licensed secondary school.

The school is dedicated to education for coexistence with Israelis, nonviolence, and democracy. It has no political or formal religious affiliation. Muslim and Christian students attend school together, and the hope is to someday have Jewish children learning beside them.

Because of the school's independence, it receives no political or religious funding. Students are asked to pay a small tuition, but economic hardship among the Palestinian population has meant that fewer and fewer students are able to pay. The school faces ongoing financial hardships, and relies heavily on donations from people in many countries including the United States.

Students from Hope Flowers are encouraged to interact with other Israeli children. One such project involved planting a garden together. The children met once a week to work on the garden, learn songs in each other's language, play games, and share a meal and blessing. Unfortunately, the increased violence in the area has brought most of this interaction to a standstill.

Israeli rabbis and other educators visit the school to help the children learn about Jewish people. They teach them Hebrew and explain Jewish customs and holidays. Hope Flowers also has a close relationship with several Israeli schools that share similar peaceful ideals.

Life for the students and teachers at Hope Flowers is not easy. Many of the children live in refugee camps and many of their parents are no longer able to work due to border closings. One teacher had her home destroyed by Israeli tanks. Even after losing her house, she continued to tell the children to believe in peace.

There are many days when the school is closed because the fighting makes it too dangerous for anyone to go out on the street. Even when the school is open, it is difficult for the students and staff to get there. The main road to the school has been closed by blockades for many months. Accessing the school by alternate routes is difficult and dangerous.

Teachers and students were once trapped inside the school after Israeli tanks rolled in and began shooting nearby. The terrified students were escorted home after the American Consulate in Jerusalem and the International Red Cross intervened.

Many people, however, don't support Hope Flowers. The Palestinian Authority and Hamas, a violent radical Palestinian group, continually pressure parents to withdraw their children from the school. They tell them that the coexistence principles that the school is teaching "threaten national interests" and are "un-Arabic." This pressure has prompted many fearful parents to take their children out of the school.

In contrast to the Hope Flowers message, the Palestinian Authority has been known to encourage young people toward violence and hatred instead of a peaceful coexistence.

Violence is part of the children's everyday life.

They have become so used to the sound of shelling that some say they have trouble sleeping without it. Many of the children become angry, frustrated, or depressed. The teachers are very sensitive to this, and spend a great deal of time helping the children deal with their problems and fears.

Before Hussein Issa died, he once said, "My dream is for Muslims, Jews, and Christians to live together. It will not happen without hard work." Hussein may be gone, but his family and friends continue to operate the school according to his vision. The work continues to be difficult, but they believe that they can one day make his dream come true. What a wonderful gift that would be for all children.

PHOTO (COLOR): A child plays on the playground of the Hope Flowers school.

PHOTO (COLOR): Hope Flowers school, which is now housed in this building, began in a single room in 1994.

PHOTO (COLOR): Hope Flowers students works on an art project.

PHOTO (COLOR): The school relies on donations for equipment and supplies.

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By Christine Graf

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